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**Understanding Qualitative Research: A Review of Judith
Meloy's *Writing the Qualitative Dissertation: Understanding
by Doing*
by
Theresa J. Bowen[±]**

The Qualitative Report, Volume 3, Number 3, September, 1997

As a doctoral student facing major and minor exams in the upcoming weeks, I am looking ahead at writing a proposal that works in qualitative research. After reading many articles and chapters in books, I have found that there is no single accepted design for a qualitative research proposal ([Glesne & Peshkin](#), 1992; [Heath](#), 1997; [Meloy](#), 1994). In my search for example proposals online, in journals, and in books, I have come to recommend Judith M. Meloy's book, *Writing the Qualitative Dissertation: Understanding by Doing* as a beginning to writing to a qualitative dissertation.

Meloy has done research using qualitative methods to gather data from correspondents about their experience in the trenches, the trenches being qualitative dissertation writing. She found qualified informants who could provide additional perspectives that have used qualitative methodologies in their dissertations to write to her. Meloy showed, through her cover stories, how it feels and what it means to do qualitative research for the doctoral student. She did this by describing, in rich detail, the dilemmas facing novice qualitative researchers. I found myself in several of the vignettes she has presented because I am the student asking for help in doing qualitative research. By reading other's stories I have grown in confidence that I, too, shall live through this upcoming dissertation project.

In Chapter One, Meloy asks, What will a qualitative dissertation look like in the end? Will looking at a variety of structures and processes help novice researchers begin their journey? She provides several examples of formatting options along with pointing out process and traditional influences. Meloy included her own dissertation chapter titles as an example. She also explained how she drew on tradition and circumvented it. What is very helpful at the end of each chapter is a set of thought provoking questions that guide the reader to question their own stance in writing qualitative research.

"Selecting a Committee," the subject of Chapter Two, provided several examples from her informants that offered a clear sense of direction for working with a committee. Many of the comments provided an effective example of how many issues of concern, to doctoral students, might intermingle. Suggestions help the novice researcher if they are less clear about the implication of their methodological choices. Meloy pointed out that many committee chairs are learning about qualitative dissertations and along with students should make collaborative

decisions. Students should appeal to the intellectual curiosity of quantitative-positivist oriented professors. It is suggested and I believe it is true, students should know the assumptions of both qualitative and quantitative perspectives to better define and defend their own work. The intent of this chapter was not only to feature some concerns, but also to suggest possible ways of thinking about issues integral to the selecting of and interacting with a chosen doctoral committee.

The next step in Meloy's book was to understand by proposing. The correspondents' letters provide evidence of a variety of learning cultures as they describe how they prepared their proposal and what they learned by doing it. Presentations, proposal models, and defense questions: etic/emic sections, are briefly addressed in this chapter. After reading this chapter I felt I wanted to have more examples of an actual proposal and not just how the few informants had done them.

Chapter Four, "Supporting Understanding and Maximizing Resources," is an excellent chapter that provided many resources that I have found very helpful. I have referred to this chapter many times in my search for more resources on qualitative research. Study groups are discussed in this chapter as another positive influence supporting the doing of qualitative research. The respondents' rich description offered an abundance of material for doctoral students and committee members to explore. A list of criteria for judging quality research was included with definitions of verite, integrity, rigor, utility, vitality, and aesthetics to be looked at in a qualitative study.

Research texts often assume that the researcher has a problem to undertake and little time is spent discussing what is and what is not a problem indicated Meloy. More time these days is spent on where to look for a problem. Determining a focus in qualitative research usually includes examining the research context, then changing one's mind and giving up preconceived beliefs of what is important. This was the central theme of Chapter Five, connecting focus, literature, and ownership. This chapter gave reflections of two informants' experiences of this challenge. Questions were intermingled at the end of each topic, hard soul searching questions, that I wished I had the answers to.

I found the next chapter on keeping a journal quite valuable and to this day I keep notes about ideas I have while I am driving, reading, eating, and just everyday living. Field work and journals go hand in hand. Getting in the practice of journal writing can be very difficult, but it is amazing the detail you forget if you do not write your thoughts down or dictate your notes into a tape player. It is suggested in this chapter that a running narrative of why decisions were made (logic, necessity, official constraints, etc.) while doing your research can be as valuable as the research itself, and I agree. I experienced this first hand while conducting my qualitative pilot study. Worthy ideas are forgotten.

Chapter Seven dealt with methodology and analysis. The processes of qualitative research are multiple: they are linked to each other and to the person who is the research instrument. Unlike the systematic progression in quantitative design, like following the formulas for significance, the image of progression in qualitative research occurs sometimes together or can most often not so that the movement is not linear and logically visible. The role of the researcher is discussed

via vignettes of respondents and questions were posed such as, What is your writing style?; What are your goals of the dissertation?; Who is your audience? These thought provoking questions guided the reader through an examination of his or her thesis purpose.

Defining the end is not an easy task, as we are never, quite there (Meloy, 1994). This chapter, "Understanding by Finishing," addressed correspondents' thoughts and concerns about publication. Several lengthy stories depicted a sadness that was felt when it was finally over. Meloy analyzed "war stories" to provoke our thinking on issues critical to responsible humane research.

In conclusion, I recommend this book to any novice qualitative researcher as a beginning to understanding or even to a seasoned researcher for a chance to look back, and reflect on their own "war story" because we all have them.

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